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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to identify conflict resolution strategies used by siblings when they chose television programs to watch and to examine differences in strategies associated with sex of child, the age interval between siblings, and their ordinal position. Children, 116 pairs of siblings in first through sixth grade, were interviewed about their program conflict resolution strategies and those of their siblings. The pairs were about equally distributed across the four possible relationship structures (male male, male female, female male, and female female) and about equally distributed between small and large age intervals. Ten categories of strategies emerged from analyses of the data. Among those reporting no conflict, several reasons emerged which indicated varying levels of persuasive power being used by siblings. Results indicated several differences in strategies were associated with the genders of both siblings and age intervals between them. Results are discussed in terms of the egocentric and non-egocentric strategies adopted by children of various ages. The discussion focuses on the implications of such conflict resolving strategies for the sibling co-viewing context and the general nature of sibling relationships. (RH)

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SIBLINGS' STRATEGIES FOR RESOLVING CONFLICT OVER TELEVISION PROGRAM CHOICE

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Introduction

In 1981, Aimee Dorr suggested that the television medium may be an unwitting participant in family interaction by regulating family routines, providing opportunities for family interaction, and providing topics of conversation for family members. Unfortunately, not all of the interaction that occurs among family members involving the television set or its content is pleasant or agreeable. The presence of a single set or a preferred set in multiple set households sets up opportunities for family members to disagree about what to watch. Lyle & Hoffman (1972) found that siblings frequently argued about what to watch on television. Though some studies provide evidence about the outcomes of conflict among siblings over program choice (e.g., Lull, 1978; Zahn & Baran, 1984), little research has been done to investigate the process by which siblings negotiate program choice conflicts. The purpose of the study presented here is to examine strategies used by siblings in solving program choice disagreements.

Review of the Literature

Television viewing frequently occurs within social contexts, particularly family contexts. Dorr (1981) noted that most of the viewing by children and adolescents occurs with other family members present (p. 3). Bower (1973) and Rubin (1986) indicated that most viewing by children is done with siblings. Rubin reported that although 30% of the viewing time of five to nine year olds

was done with parents, at least half of their viewing time was with siblings. Zahn & Baran (1984) asked college students to remember their sibling co-viewing experiences and found that youngest siblings were most likely to view with male siblings and least likely to view with female siblings or in sibling groups. Middle siblings most often viewed with younger siblings (p. 850). Despite Bower's (1973) finding that with the availability of more than one set in a household, co-viewing declined, Lull (1978) found that among the families he observed, there was usually a preferred set which was in high demand and facilitated opportunities for co-viewing.

With each sibling co-viewing situation comes the opportunity for conflict over programs. A number of studies have investigated the frequencies and outcomes of sibling conflict over television program choice. Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs, & Roberts (1978) summarized some of the earlier research on program conflict among family members. They noted that conflict is more frequent among siblings than among children and parents. When an older sibling disagrees with a young sibling, the older prevails more frequently. Similarly, Zahn & Baran (1984) found that "oldest sibling respondents were more likely to win more of the program choice conflicts than middle siblings, who in turn, won more than youngest sibling respondents" (p. 851). Youngest siblings were the least likely to win conflicts over programs in this study. Lull (1978) found that adults and older children were all more likely than young children to

"get their way" when the whole family had to select what would be watched together.

The research on sibling co-viewing does not indicate how children negotiate the program choice conflict among themselves. Research on sibling conflict resolution indicates that strategies differ for first-borns and later-borns, males and females, and for sibling pairs with different age intervals between them. For instance, Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg (1970) found that ordinal position (first-born, later-born) was related to the power of the persuasive techniques used by siblings. First-borns tended to use high power techniques (e.g., bossiness) and last-borns used low power techniques (e.g., appealing to others outside the sibling dyad for help, crying, pouting, sulking, using prayer). These authors also found the conflict resolution strategies to vary by sex, such that males were more bossy, wrestling, hurting, tricking, and threatening and females were likely to ask for help or sympathy. Only older sisters were polite in their conflict resolution strategies, using such techniques as explaining, asking, and taking turns. Bryant (1982) reported Bigner's (1974a) findings that older male siblings had more power than females within the sibling structure and so did not develop negotiation "savvy" in dealing with younger siblings.

The evidence about the unevenness of power within the sibling subsystem of families suggests that children do not all experience family life in the same way. As Brody & Stoneman (1983) suggest in their contextualist approach to the study of television in families, siblings assume different roles vis a' vis one another when their parents are not part of the viewing situation. Bryant (1982)

suggests that conflict among siblings may provide opportunities for children to learn such interpersonal skills as negotiation, turn taking, and compromise. The television co-viewing setting may provide some of the most frequent opportunities for the development of these skills through conflict with siblings over television program choices.

The research questions for this study were:

1) What strategies do children use for resolving program choice conflicts?
2) Do these strategies vary with the sibling structure variables of sex of each child, the age interval between siblings, and their ordinal position (oldest or youngest)?

Method

The data for this study were collected as part of a larger investigation of sibling television co-viewing. One hundred sixteen pairs of siblings were interviewed during the Fall of 1984 and 1985. In 82 of the pairs, the youngest children were in first or second grade. In the other 34 pairs, the youngest children were in third through sixth grades. Overall, in 59 of the pairs, the siblings were separated by 0 to 2 years (referred to here as small-interval) and in 57 of the pairs, the siblings were separated by 3 or more years (referred to as large-interval). The pairs were relatively equally distributed across the four possible ordinal position combinations, with 32 being older male/younger male pairs (MM), 30 being older male/younger female pairs (MF), 27 being older female/younger male pairs (FM), and 27 being older female/ younger female pairs (FF).

Subjects were interviewed individually in their schools. Two of the schools were lower-middle class, racially mixed schools in a suburb of a large Midwestern city. One school was an upper-middle

class parochial in a small Midwestern city and the other was a middle-class school in another small Midwestern city. The principals of each school provided lists of all sibling pairs at their schools. Parental permission was obtained through letters mailed to the parents' homes.

The questions used in this study were adapted from those used by Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg (1970). Siblings were asked to respond to two open-ended questions: "Let's say you and _____ want to watch different show on TV. How do you get him/her to watch what you want to watch?" and "How does he/she get you to watch something he/she wants to watch?" Twenty two different types of responses emerged from analysis of the verbatim responses to the two questions. These were collapsed in to 10 clearly distinct categories. For later analysis, these categories were identified as high power strategies (using physical force, threats, and taking control of the television set) and low power strategies (telling a parent, crying/pouting/screaming, begging/pleading, promising rewards/bribery, and taking turns). Each child's first response to each of these questions were coded using the 10 category system by two independent coders. Reliability between the coders was .87 (agreements/ agreements + disagreements). Each child was also asked about the frequency of co-viewing with the sibling participating in the study.

Results

All of the siblings in this study reported that they frequently watch television together. Among young siblings, 35.9% watch with an older sibling at least sometimes and 61% watch together a lot.

Among older siblings, 50.9% watch with a younger sibling at least sometimes and 48.5% watch together a lot.[1]

Not all of the sibling pairs reported experiencing conflict over program choice. Forty three percent (n = 99) of all children either said conflict didn't occur (22%, n = 51) or they simply watched different television sets (21%, n = 48). Forty nine percent of older siblings reported no conflict, with 25% (n = 28) saying conflict didn't occur and 24% (n = 27) reporting that the two watch different sets. Among young children, 20% (n = 23) said conflict didn't occur and 18% (n = 21) said the two would watch different sets. Responses such as "We like the same things," and "I just ask him and he says 'ok'" were typical of the no conflict responses.

Among those children who did experience conflict over program choice, a number of differences in strategies were evident. Most children (41% n = 94) use low power strategies. Fourteen percent (n = 32) use promises/bribery, 15% (n = 33) suggest taking turns, 8% (n = 19) appeal to a parent for help. Only 3% (n = 7) cry/pout/scream and 1% (n = 3) beg/plead. Sixteen percent (n = 36) of all subjects use high power strategies to gain their siblings' compliance. Seven percent (n = 15) take control of the set, 7% (n = 15) use physical force, and 2% (n = 2) use threats.

Older children were more likely to use low power than high power strategies ($t = 2.33$, $df = 66$, $p < .05$), as were younger children ($t = 1.83$, $df = 70$, $p < .10$). Among older children, 16% percent (n = 18) promise rewards/bribe, 13% (n = 15) suggest taking turns, 8%

[1]Note. On occasion, relationships significant at alpha levels between .05 and .10 are reported because they seem to indicate trends among the variables which may have reached statistical significance had the sample sizes been larger.

(n = 9) ask a parent, 3% (n = 3) cry/pout/scream, and 1% (n = 1) begs/pleads. A similar pattern held true for younger children, though more suggest turn taking (16%, n = 18) than make promises/bribes (12%, n = 14). Nine percent (n=10) of young children ask a parent, 3% (n = 4) cry/pout/scream, and 2% (n = 2) beg/plead. Of the 13% of older children who use high power strategies, 6% (n = 7) use physical force, and 3% (n = 3) use both threats and took control of the set. Twenty percent (n = 24) of the young children use high power strategies, with 10% (n = 12) taking control of the set, 8% (n = 9) using physical force, and 2% (n = 2) using threats.

Some differences in conflict resolution strategies were also found between males and females. Almost half of the males (48%, n = 58) in this study reported that conflict over programs either didn't occur (23%, n = 28) or was resolved by viewing alternative sets (25%, n = 30). Likewise, 38% (n = 41) of the females had no conflict, either because they agreed with their siblings (21%, n = 23) or they watched different sets (17%, n = 18).

Of the children who did have conflict over what to watch, 19% of males (n = 24) and only 11% (n = 12) of females used high power strategies. Females were much more likely to use low power than high power strategies ($t = 2.5$, $df = 65$, $p < .02$) and slightly more likely than males to use low power strategies ($t = 1.9$, $df = 92$, $p < .10$). For instance, physical force was used by 10% (n = 12)of males and only 4% of females (n = 4). The most common low power strategies for females were turn-taking (21%, n = 23), telling a parent (12%, n = 13) and promising rewards (12%, n = 13). When males used low power

strategies, they promised rewards (16%, n = 19) rather suggesting taking turns (8%, n = 10). Telling a parent, crying/pouting/screaming, and begging/pleading were all mentioned by 5% or less of the males.

In order to look for relationships between the sex of sibling, age interval, and ordinal position variables, chi-square analyses were conducted. Row and column analyses were used to locate differences within significant tables.

Older brothers were more likely than older sisters to use high power strategies ($X^2 = 7.3$, $p < .02$), such as physical force and threatening. Older sisters were somewhat more likely to seek the help of a parent or suggest taking turns ($X^2 = 15.21$, $p < .05$). Older brothers perceived that their siblings would use high power strategies to gain compliance ($X^2 = 6.87$, $p < .07$), though they expected such strategies more from younger sisters rather than younger brothers ($X^2 = 6.6$, $p < .10$). Older brothers from large-interval pairs were slightly more likely than older sisters from those pairs to use high power strategies ($X^2 = 4.77$, $p < .09$). There were no significant differences between older brothers' and sisters' strategies from the small-interval pairs.

Younger children were more likely to use high power strategies with their brothers than with their sisters ($X^2 = 6.71$, $p < .03$). For example, among the young children in the large-interval pairs, taking control of the set (a high power strategy) was most likely to be used when older brothers were involved and turn-taking (low power strategy) was more likely to be used when older sisters were involved

(X^2 = 15.54, $p < .05$). In the small-interval pairs, the young boys were more likely than the young girls to use high power (X^2 = 5.98, $p < .05$). For instance, though the sample sizes are too small to find significant differences, of the 7 young children from small interval pairs who said they would use physical force to gain the compliance of their sibling, only one of them was a girl. Three of these young brothers use physical force on an older sister and the other 3 use physical force on an older brother. The young boys from the small-interval pairs also thought that their older brothers would be more likely to use high power strategies against them than their older sisters (X^2 = 5.67, $p < .05$).

Discussion

Television co-viewing with siblings was a common activity for all of the children in this study. Interestingly, according to many of the children, conflict about what to watch did not occur, either because the siblings could agree or another television set was an acceptable alternative for one of them. The use of two sets by some of these pairs is in line Bower's (1973) finding that co-viewing declines in multi-set households. At least for some children, another set is a useful and acceptable alternative to arguing over television programs.

The fact that 22% of all children agreed about what to watch may be evidence of the reciprocity of sibling relationships (Dunn, 1983). Dunn suggests that "the familiarity and intimacy of the children, the extent to which they recognize and share each other's interests, and the emotional intensity of their relationship" are all part of the peer-like, reciprocal nature of sibling relationships.

For at least some of the children in this study, shared interest precluded conflict over program choice. For another substantial group of these children, recognition of the other child's program interests did not lead to conflict, but to a relatively easily negotiated compromise between alternative television sets.

For the majority of the children in this study, however, conflict with their siblings over program choice did occur. Low power strategies for resolving the conflicts were suggested by most of the children, though a few differences by age, sex, and age-interval were evident. Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg (1970) found that males and older children were most likely to use high power strategies to resolve conflict with siblings. Similarly, Bigner (1974a) found that older males had more power within the sibling relationship and, thus, were deficient in their negotiating abilities with younger siblings. Our findings suggest that while most children were likely to use low power techniques, males tended toward more high power than low power strategies and also use high power more often than females do. Consistent with the findings of Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg (1970) and Bigner (1974a), older brothers were more likely to be involved in high power conflict resolution, either using high power themselves or thinking a younger sibling would use high power against them. Reciprocally, younger siblings would use high power with older brothers more than older sisters.

In examining the specific low power strategies used by the children in this study, there appears to be some support for Bryant's (1982) notion that sibling conflict may lead to the development of negotiation, turn-taking, and compromise skills. Nearly one-third

(29%) of all children suggested either turn-taking or promises of reward (negotiation) to resolve conflict. This pattern was consistent among both older and younger children, although females tended to suggest turn-taking more often than males. The more negative low power strategies (cry/pout/scream, beg/plead, tell parent) were relatively rare, accounting for only 12% of the strategies used by all children. The two positive low power strategies (turn taking and promising reward) taken in conjunction with all of children who used alternative sets, suggest that, indeed, program choice conflicts do provide children with opportunities to learn and test positive interpersonal compliance gaining strategies.

In conclusion, the data presented here suggest that while conflicts over program choices do occur among siblings, the resolution of those conflicts, in most cases, is neither difficult nor unpleasant. Rather, frequent co-viewing provides many children with the opportunity to learn and practice socially acceptable interpersonal skills. This study also suggests that children do not all experience program choice episodes in the same ways. As Brody & Stoneman (1983) noted, siblings assume different roles with each other in the television viewing context and this study suggests that these roles are dependent, at least in part, on the ages, sexes, and age intervals between siblings.

Further research is needed to understand the scope of the impact of sibling program choice disagreements on other aspect of sibling relationships. Observational and ethnographic would add to our understanding of sibling conflict, in general, throughout the sibling family subsystem. It is unlikely that disageements stop after the

choices of programs are made and further research should investigate children's repertoires of conflict resolution strategies during co-viewing. More data are needed to describe differences in conflict resolution between the four possible ordinal position pairs (MM, MF, FM, FF). In addition, research needs to move beyond examining sibling pairs. This research is limited by using only sibling pairs. Many children have more than one sibling and have different relationships with each one. Many children have more than one sibling and have different relationships with each one. This study does recognize and begin to describe the nature of the sibling co-viewing context. Further research should also examine how sibling conflict, both before and during co-viewing, mediates the effects that television has on individual children and sibling relationships.

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